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ABSTRACT

This paper uses the setting of a "conversation" between Scully and Mulder of the popular "X Files" television program to discuss some current composition theorists and their ideas. The paper muses on the work of Kristie Fleckenstein (who claims there is a "somatic mind" which moves between discursive and corporeal space) and Donna Harraway (who writes of cyborgs) and suggests that their writing is a "kind of specialized performance addressed to a small--if powerful--audience." It also suggests that visualizing existence in terms of dualities such as mental/physical or public/private is problematic and asks whether these theories have any empirical validity. Empiricism is the codification of those few things that are known, although the very act of narrowing and circumscribing a field so that it can be studied carefully limits what a person can "know" and distorts in some ways what will be found. An article by Trainor and Godley is discussed which is an observation of events regarding the removal of a basic writing course at an unnamed state university and the failure to remove a similar course at another state university in the same system. The paper questions whether there is a need to argue theory over practice or practice over theory. (NKA)

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ED 430 242

Is the Truth Out There? Fables of Abduction, Abdication, and Absolution on the Post-Profession, Pre-Millennial Landscape

By: Alice Calderonello and Deb Shaller

The X-File themes plays, volume increasing....

Mulder: (looking at a folder)- Look here, Scully. I think we should investigate Kristie Fleckenstein. Her X-file just might give us the answers we need. She's claiming there's something called a "somatic mind," which moves between discursive and corporeal space. If this is true, it just might provide the solution to alien abduction.

Scully: (perhaps with one eyebrow raised and a slight sigh) Fox, I suppose there might be some use in investigating the idea of something which moves in ways we don't fully understand or which articulates "mind" more fully or in more complex ways than current scientific theories account for. But what is your attraction to Fleckenstein's file? You read over hundreds of these and pick out ones that "matter" in ways I don't understand. Last year you were positively obsessed with Donna Harraway's file and all other files that were in any way "cyborgean." "The Truth is Out There, Scully"--you assured me--and we spent weeks investigating possible cyborg sightings, debating what did/did not constitute cyborgian existence and cyborg writing. I understood--I think--your obsession; my abduction has, perhaps, rendered me cyborgean (because of my implant?). But what difference has any of the time we've spent had on our work here?

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Mulder: I would think you of all people would find fleckenstein's contention to be of interest since you claim I'm obsessed with phantasms, with things no one else can see. Here, with the theory of somatic mind, we restore the flesh, as it were, make ourselves more material and thus less abductable. But also less wild and unpredictable; we don't just shoot around randomly--as you frequently remind me that I do. A more permeable boundary between the physical and the symbolic allows us to transform ourselves and to resist in ways that disembodied discourse denies us. Sure, I'm the postmodern man, but that doesn't mean I'm not a MAN in the physical sense.

Scully: I'm confused. How does envisioning identity "as an emergent process, ensuing from the permeable materiality of the being-in-a-material place (fleckenstein's own words) " make us more material? And (or?) how does it allow is to transform ourselves and resist in ways that disembodied discourse denies us? I know that Flecktenstein claims that "to write somatically, to write materially and discursively requires...immersion and emergence, " which (in turn) means that we both "write and read sensitive to the subjectivity of placement" yet (as well) "making ourselves responsible for...[the] construction [of boundaries." But I'm not sure I understand how these words would manifest themselves in practice. Plus, it seems to me that the analyses of the files that we read are often penned to enhance the gs rating of the writers--and offer little insight or information of value beyond a kind of specialized performance addressed to a small--if powerful--audience. Careerism abounds here at the FBI, as you well know.

Mulder: When did you become so cynical, Scully? Sure, careerism abounds, but hardly for those of us working at the edges of the debate, looking for new metaphors to give the proper weight of resistance. Cyborgs, somatic minds--we need these visions to place us where we can begin to write truth of our existences, the lives we live between the usual dualities of mental and physical, public and private, earth and, uh, sky. Trust me, Scully: without Harraway or Fleckenstein and the work of analists who comment upon them, we're vulnerable to manipulations by the cigarette-smoking, power-wielding men in suits--whether they're in university administrations or corporate boardrooms. >

Scully: Fox, you seem to making two separate claims (or three if you count your characterization of me as being cynical). I hear you suggesting that the concept of the somatic mind is a vision that can help us write the "truth" of our existences. I believe I can also infer from your statement that visualizing these existences in terms of dualities such as mental/physical or public/private is problematic. Could you tell me why the process of conceptualizing in terms of dualities is to be avoided? And how or why might thinking through a lens (or vision) such as the somatic mind make us less vulnerable to those who wield power? Does is make us less "stable" (or substantial) and--therefore--less liable to be manipulated (because it's hard to move something you can't quite "see" or "perceive?)? Or does imagining ourselves as existing semantically make us less predictable (to ourselves as well as others)--and does this make it harder for "them" to outguess us

(assuming there is a them....) And, finally--and I'd like us to talk about this at some length--does it matter whether or not these theories (visions?) have any empirical validity what so ever? I mean, I almost hear you saying we need these--phantasms--to inspire us with, what, hope? belief in the possibility of change? If we want or need some sort of transportational or transformational experience why not visit an Art Museum or go hear a symphony?

Mulder: All right, Scully, let me try to answer SOME of your questions here. Dualities are reductive and keep us from finding truths that are neither this nor that--neither human nor machine, mind nor body, body nor place--keep us from imagining more complex interconnections, the movements back and forth and around any given time, place, or subject. Feminisms of all kinds have urged us to abandon our dualistic ways of thinking--like male and female--and the kinds of categories an insistence on dualism insists on creating. Going somatic allows us to avoid the problems of postmodern discourse--the problems that result from claiming that EVERYTHING is discourse--without giving up entirely the best parts of postmodern critique (as Fleckenstein argues). We are discursive entities, but embodied ones; we have a corporeality, a weight, and a substance. In metaphorical terms, we can't be lifted so easily and made to do political work we never intended to do. We are not merely free-floating signifiers; we are rooted to a place which is itself the result of discursive and embodied practices. Does that answer your question? And as to empiricism, well, Scully, you know what I think of that. Empiricism is merely the codification of those very few things that we know,

designed to methodologically perpetuate our ability to know only a very few things.

Scully: Fox, you are being too hard on empiricism. I will concede that the very act of narrowing and circumscribing a field so that you can study it carefully limits what you can "know" and distorts in some ways what you will find. Still, such studies contribute in vital ways to our well-being. Medical science, for example, has given us weapons against disease such as antibiotics and vaccines; how could these have been developed without clinical trials--without carefully controlled studies? Moreover, friends of mine who work in the field of writing read research reports about the effectiveness of particular teaching strategies such as sentence combining or studies that gauge the affects of grammar instruction on writing improvement. Are you saying such studies have no value? Because if you are I violently disagree with you--despite the fact that sometimes I know you exaggerate claims just to get me going.

Let me make my point with a specific example: Could you pull the Trainor and Godley X-file? It might have been classified under "W" Since the account is entitled "After Wyoming." Now, I found this particular file quite noteworthy because it is an ACTUAL observation (and comparisons) of events regarding the removal (or disappearance, we might say) of a Basic Writing course at an unnamed state university. The file also chronicles the failure to remove (or the NON disappearance) of a Basic Writing course at another state university in the same system. Or as Trainor and Godley express

it, they "document the reactions of two different writing programs on two different State U campuses...to the 1991 directive from the State U president, their transformations after the directive, and the labor-related consequences of their chosen transformations." This study was fascinating and useful because the detailed observations and the resulting analysis suggest avenues for strategic behavior. If you ask me this file has a great deal of potential to provide the solution to alien abductions. In fact, it might help us develop a plan to resist alien colonization--or at the very least corporitization. What do you think?

Mulder: Actually, Scully, I agree--though I'd say we need to preserve a sharp distinction between "actual" and "factual." I'm all for actual observation and report. We should remember, too, that if what you see is too different from what you're expected to see, you just might not be believed. Still, you're right: the Trainor and Godley file is tremendously useful for its sightings and for the strategies it implicitly suggests. And it also seems significant that Trainor and Godley are both graduate students--a time in our profession where genuinely transgressive work is sometimes even encouraged--provided you're not going to stick around after the degree and make a nuisance of yourself. Of course, graduate students are also oppressed and exploited, but I'd argue there's far more room there for creating X-Files than in the universities these students might ultimately enter. But I don't see why we need to come down on one side or the other here, to argue theory over

practice or practice over theory--doesn't that just take us into another problematic duality?

Scully: all right--"Actual/factual"; yes the distinction is an important one. My choice of words may not have been as precise as I might have wished. But what I was trying to suggest is that Trainor and Godley did take the time and trouble to observe places, people, and processes. And I don't believe that they did so without any theoretical grounding, either. In fact, they discuss discourses "of labor inequities, disciplinary marginalization, and teacher-heroism" that are "dominant themes in the literature of composition" and try to articulate how these "were transformed in surprising, unpredictable, and sometimes problematic ways by administrators, faculty, and part-timers." Now, I don't imagine that it was either Trainor's or Godley's project to articulate some sort of grammar of transformation --"This is how this particular discourse will be transmogrified under these particular local circumstances." In fact, one of their "points" may be that it is impossible to describe or devise such a grammar. Still, I do believe that they were trying to suggest some potential outcomes with respect to the strategic use of particular discourses that may be relevant to local circumstances other than the two they described. So I guess my question is what does the concept of the "somatic mind" add to all of this? Or to put it another way, if I were at an institution that was being threatened by some action (the outsourcing of basic writing; the development of a hybrid race to make alien hegemonic colonization possible) why isn't reading the Trainor and Godley piece adequate or

sufficient. What does supplementing it with the idea of the semipermiable mind/place construct add?

Mulder: GEEZ, Scully. I mean, carrots might be really healthy to eat, but I'd also argue that I'm a happier--therefore healthier--person when I eat large slices of home-made pie. I mean, am I the only one who finds this stuff interesting? Granted, reading the somatic mind piece might be a far cry from eating pie, but I still like thinking about these things, finding ways to meta-think differently. We know that all of our theories and all of our practices are complicitous in the alien colonization project--in some way, everything we do is making this take-over possible. Unless we constantly look for different ways of thinking and being, how can we possibly hope to to see what's happening? I mean, most people don't even SEE what's going on. So why is that? And why is that so few people feel free to speak up about the practices they do see?

Scully: I hate to admit this, but I think what you just said made some sense to me. In fact it has prompted me to think of ways in which the Flecktenstein file might enhance the strategic moves suggested by the Trainor and Godley file. See what you think of my logic here: Trainor and Godley seem to imply that a careful analysis of an event (its place, local circumstances, principle actors, etc.) might suggest strategic behavior that could be deployed within another, similar situation to yield more (as opposed to less) desirable results. Yet The Trainor and Godley piece does not address how actors can be transformed by and can transform a place

within (and during) such a process. Take my situation here as an example. You well know that I was originally paired with you to discredit both you and the X-files. But what I "am" has changed. It's "true" that I have had scientific training; I am a medical doctor. THAT hasn't changed. However, my experience of being abducted and experimented on against my will has transformed my sense of myself in ways that I still don't fully understand as well as my perception of the place in which I live (the United States) and work (the US government; the FBI). This has made me, Mulder, someone who's thoughts and actions can no longer be easily predicted. Ironically, I am the one adding credibility to the X-files by engaging in scientific analyses of that which "they" would like to classify as anomalous and therefore erasable. I am the one who is in some essential way keeping the X-files alive--and not just at the margins. Look how high up the effort to get rid of our operation has gone.]

In my understanding, what the notion of the somatic mind adds, then, is the idea that a strategy (even a very specifically designed one for a particular place/situation/set of actors) must always be provisional because as the strategy unfolds it may transform players, who may (in turn) transform a place. And this transformed (and thus "new" place and the transformed (and thus "different") players will always require NEW, different strategies. With respect to those state universities that Trainor and Godley describe, it is quite likely that there was an actual (or at least perceived) financial crisis that would have prompted the

consideration of out-sourcing basic writing. Under such circumstances both places might have been seen as "life boats." In one instance, however, the discourses of "teacher heroism" perhaps helped to depict a life boat with too many persons within it; some would have to be sacrificed for any to survive. [And note how heroism plays into and strengthens this "place." Heroes are often sacrificed.] Consider an alternative "place"; what if the lifeboat had a slow, but serious leak and was somewhat close to land and what if the part timers were some of the strongest rowers? The circumstances would be dramatically different. You are getting a glazed look in your eyes, Mulder. Heads up--are you following me?

Mulder: Uh, what was that, Scully? I missed some of it. You know what your problem is? You're too fond of abstractions. Let's go: we've got a crime scene to investigate, police to interview, pie to eat.

Scully: You go ahead. I've got some reading I need to catch up on.

Mulder: You reading anything I should know about?

Scully: Not necessarily. I'm just going through Gadamer's *Truth and Method* again. And a couple of people told me I should read this book *called A Grammar of Motives;* it's by someone named Burke....

The X-file Theme plays again..